



The Reason of Imagination. The Blazing Worlds of Margaret Cavendish and Siri Hustvedt

Valeria Cammarata

Abstract

This essay is aimed at building a bridge between two female writers very distant in time and place, Margaret Cavendish and Siri Hustvedt, on three basis: that of a work they have in common – which Hustvedt has almost rewritten from Cavendish, *The Blazing World* –, two of their proto-feminist and feminist tactics to overcome the boundaries posed by patriarchy – that of embodiment and that of masquerade –, and their consideration of imagination – as a fundamental means of knowledge.

Though one of the peculiarities of 17th century paradigm shift was the distinction of the scientific discourse from the religious, magic, mystic and artistic one, yet a link still seems to remain between science and imagination, as demonstrated, for instance, by Galileo's aesthetic attitude (Panofsky), by Hooke's and Baker's imaginative suggestion before their microscopes (Hooke; Baker; Nicholson), Bacon's duplicity as «the enthusiast of both power of imagination and understanding and as the harbinger of narrow objectivism and the dissociation of sensibility» (Levao: 5; Bacon). However the idea of imagination as a true means of knowledge seems to be a merely female intuition, or rather a subversive way to shift the scientific paradigm once again, replacing objective and disembodied observation with subjective imagination and speculation. This is the main subject of Margaret Cavendish's best known



work, *The Blazing World* (1666), where her alter ego is free to build a whole social and philosophical system based on corporality and subjectivity.

From the same conception of imagination does Siri Hustvedt start when in 2014 she rewrites *The Blazing World*: the story of an artist who, in the twentieth century, still tries to face the overwhelming misogyny with the performance of the body and the theory of embodiment. The protagonist is really close to the Duchess of Newcastle, especially for her desire to overturn the artificial gender categories through a real masquerade. The voices of Cavendish, Hustvedt and of all their alter egos follow each other through documents, diary pages and pure narration, in which it is difficult to say what is fiction and what is truth.

Keywords

Siri Hustvedt, Margaret Cavendish, experimental philosophy, neuroscience, masquerade

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The most recent discoveries deriving from the exchanges between aesthetics and neuroscience – especially those stressing the importance of the sensory-motor system in both scientific and aesthetic experience (Gallese 2005; 2011; 2017; 2018; Gallese & Sinigaglia, 2011) – have raised a particular attention on the subjectivity of mental processes, especially those related to the knowledge processes, and on the role of imagination. Experimental aesthetics is a new way of approaching aesthetic issues, such as those of images or novels as media of experience, by means of neuroscientific investigations. Nowadays the work of neuroscience applied to aesthetics has largely demonstrated how both thought and physical experience are rooted in the same brain-body system, activating what Vittorio Gallese et al. call “embodied simulation”, that is «a pre-rational, non introspective process generating a physical, and not simply “mental”, experience of the mind, motor intentions, emotions, sensations, and lived experiences of other people, even when narrated» (Gallese 2011 et al.). Embodied simulation is strictly connected to the notions of inter-subjectivity and inter-corporality («the mutual resonance of intentionally meaningful sensory motor behaviour» Gallese 2017), by which we can understand other people (real or fictional ones) thanks to the “motor equivalence” between what they do and what we (could) do. Not only does embodied simulation connect us to other people, but also to objects (either man-made or natural), allowing them to attribute relational qualities to the potentialities of our body.

Furthermore, much of our everyday life is characterized by the experience of objects, people, actions and worlds which are not real, or which are not real yet. As for the real life, the life looked at on paintings, photographs, screens, it activates quite the same re-actions by our sensory-motor system. Actually, it activates major and more intense re-actions since, being our body not involved in any other “real” physical activity, all our energies are focused on this experience. This is the “liberated embodied simulation”: «Through an immersive state in which our attention is focused on the fictional world, we can fully deploy our simulative resources, letting our defensive guard against daily reality slip for a while» (Gallese 2017).

The embodied simulation is strictly linked to physiological vision, cultural gaze and their functioning. It is a particular kind of vision and gaze, completely different from the one theorized by 17th century natural philosophy – an objective, disembodied, omniscient, even imperialistic gaze. However, an attempt to recover the corporeality (not only) of the vision and its intrinsic intersubjectivity had already been made, in the twentieth century, by the phenomenological philosophy, of course starting with Husserl¹, but especially by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Edith Stein. Maurice Merleau-Ponty lowered the gaze into a terrain completely different from the Cartesian one: no longer as a mechanism of objectification that exists only at a perceptual level, but as an intersubjective relationship. The fundamental characteristic of this model of gaze is its embodiment, it is the carnality of perception, which is translated into a chiasmus between visible and invisible. The gaze which Merleau-Ponty refers to is not a scientific gaze, the gaze from above, the imposed gaze that distances the subject from the object in a hierarchical situation. The flesh itself, neither completely opaque nor

¹ Starting from Husserl’s distinctions among different senses of the living body, other phenomenologists like Lévinas, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir focused on different characteristics of embodiment in inter-personal relations, such as affective and erotic relations, and specifically, respectively, generativity and caress, love, desire, hate, indifference, sexuality and sexual desire, sexual ambivalence.

completely transparent, is the place of exchange between the visible and the invisible. It is the place where the only *punctum caecum* is given: the subject, his or her corporality, is the means by which the world becomes visible, but it is simultaneously what remains invisible to the subject him- or herself (Merleau-Ponty 1964; Cammarata).

The inter-subjectivity and the corporeal realization of human vision, as well as of the other senses and means of perception, opens up a brand-new series of turns in western traditional oppositions: mind/body; culture/nature²; and, moreover, objective and subjective³. In this perspective (human) body is no longer seen as a material thing but the first fundamental means by which all living beings relate to the world and its object. At the same time human mind is not an abstract, pure, spiritual, disembodied matter, but a part of our body, which expresses itself precisely through the body, bodily gestures, and the

² Once the traditional opposition of culture and nature has been broken down, culture is not conceived anymore as a system of significations and productions, but as a system of generative life, grounded in the own mortality of bodies; on the other hand, nature is not the traditional passive object of the scientific imperialistic gaze, but the common field in which all living beings move, perceive and act through their bodies.

³ One of the most interesting results of the dismantling of traditional polarities is the crisis of "binary economics", a fundamental turn especially for 1960-1970's French feminism, of which the most representative is Luce Irigaray. Irigaray has had the merit of identifying, in a binary economy made up of a rigid pattern of polar oppositions, an interpretative model that not only describes the patriarchal structure, but signals its traps and indicates the ways out. In the scheme that opposes - among others - man to woman, the feminist discourse will never find a space for its own voice, the mother's voice, not even positioning itself in the space opposite to its traditional pole, that of the father. The only way out is to stand on the sidelines, out of the scheme, breaking the rigid oppositional structures, refusing the domestication of the binary economy and the specularity that derives from it. "Precisely because the Mother, to whom Irigaray gives word, has been removed from the stereotypes of the binary economy, she herself allows a thematization of the body and of Eros which subverts the phallogocentric imagination", (Cavarero, Restaino: 103).

whole corporal phenomena. Thus, we have now to talk about “embodied minds” or “mental bodies”. In the same way nature cannot be seen any longer as the object of physical sciences gaze, but as the common field in which we all together perceive, move and act through our bodies; and culture is not only a system of significations and productions, but a system producing forms of life grounded in the body, even in its mortality (Husserl 1988: 140-182).

These results have, still nowadays, influence and confirmation in literature, which many scholars interested in a cognitivist approach consider as related, if not just the same, to the ability of mankind to make tools and, thus, to make sense (Stout, Chaminade 2009).

An example of this reciprocal influence of neuroscience and literature is without a doubt the work of Siri Hustvedt, a writer who constantly tests her scientific studies by means of literature. Indeed, being both an essayist (see works such as *Three Emotional Stories: Reflections on Memory, the Imagination, Narrative, and the Self*, 2011, *Living, Thinking, Looking*, 2011, *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women: Essays on Art, Sex, and the Mind*, 2016, and the most recent *The Delusions of Certainty*, 2018) and a novelist (*Memories of the Future*, 2019, *The Summer Without Men*, 2011, *The Shaking Woman or a History of My Nerves*, 2010, and *The Blazing World*, 2014 that we will analyze further) she perceives literature not as an illustration, an ornament, or a means of dissemination, rather as «the form in which this research can be given, since the destinies of the investigation on the mind and on the Self can't be given but in a narrative form, this being what contributes to their formation» (Cometa 2019). As we will see shortly, Siri Hustvedt's way of writing is very close to that of the 17th century writer and natural philosopher, Margaret Cavendish, not only because of the use of literature as a form of scientific investigation, but also because of the very style of writing, constantly enriched by autobiographical and metaliterary inventions, and of a deep conceiving of the corporeal, embodied form of literature. Thus, there seems to be a bridge linking Hustvedt's experimental aesthetics and Cavendish's experimental philosophy.

Experimental philosophy, born in the mid-17th century, was the reaction of the “new science” against the old natural philosophy, i.e. that kind of philosophy trying to reach knowledge about nature and humankind only through speculative reasoning. In this approach experiments and observations had the only aim of demonstrating what was already established by reason. With the spreading of new and better optical devices and, moreover, with the raising of scientific societies, this approach shifted to a more consistent consideration of observation and of the usefulness of the senses, first of all that of sight. However, the consideration of the sight as a not “too much corporeal” sense, much closer to the mind than to the body, and the support offered to this sense by mechanical devices (such as the microscope and the telescope), produced a specific kind of observation which was supposed to be impersonal and the led the supposed objectivity of science (Schaffer, Cammarata). Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, is a major example of active participation in the scientific discussion of her age. In 1666, a year after the publication of Sir Robert Hooke’s *Micrographia*, a member emeritus of the Royal Society, the Duchess published a treatise entitled *Observations on Experimental Philosophy*, opposed to the theories of the Royal Society and contesting them.

What she contested to male experimental philosophy is the assumed objectivity of science (which side a part the role of the subjective body), the belief in a mechanical vision (better than the physical one) and the surrender of imagination. Cavendish was particularly sensible to the fascination of imagination, or as she said fancy, considering it as a full means not only of knowledge, but properly of perception, the unmediated perception she was looking for. If, as she has already argued, human beings see not only with physical eyes but also with the mind, then there is a link between imagination and reason, a link women are much acquainted with. This internalization of knowledge and perception makes vision work in two different ways, according to Cavendish’s *Natural Philosophy*: first, the objects of vision are projected onto an internal and personal world; second, the external world is known through the internal, spiritual and imaginative properties of the subject. Thus imagination, that is the skill of seeing

what is not already seen, is a means of knowledge as much as observation is. Indeed, senses are limited and cannot lead us to a broader knowledge, while imagination makes us discover what might exist beyond these limits. Imagination is not considered as a free movement of the mind. It, belonging to the same brain material, is not fantastic and needs to be educated both with Natural Philosophy and Poetry, the first leading its orientation to significant forms, the second making form and beauty recognizable.

In the last two decades, the work of Siri Hustvedt, both as a writer and as a neuroscientific researcher, has built a bridge to the work and thought of Margaret Cavendish, as definitely demonstrated by her complex novel *The Blazing World*, a sort of recovery and rediscovery of the fancy written by the Duchess in 1666 as an appendix to her *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*. Siri Hustvedt's attempt is that of posing the difficulties of women to find their right place as artists (but also as writers and scientists) in the 21st century. Little has changed since the 17th century, when Margaret Cavendish was considered "Mad Madge"⁴. Hustvedt links her work to that of Cavendish also in considering the role of embodied experience and of imagination, and in the vindication of a feminist issue in the cultural and social structure of science (like other authors – such as Donna Haraway, Evelin Fox Keller, Lorraine Daston – have been doing in the last few years)⁵.

Margaret Cavendish and Siri Hustvedt have, in particular, three main focuses, which orient the whole structure of their works: a work written by Cavendish in 1666 and re-written by Hustvedt in 2014; a

⁴ Katie Whitaker, *Mad Madge: The Extraordinary Life of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, the First Woman to Live by Her Pen*, New York, Basic Books, 2002.

⁵ See for instance, Donna Haraway, *Situated Knowledges. The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, in Muriel Lederman, Ingrid Bartsch (by), *The Gender and Science Reader*, London-New York, Routledge, 2001; Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1985; Lorraine Daston, Peter Galison, *Objectivity*, New York - Cambridge, MASS, MIT Press, 2007.

precise female strategy to speak as a subject in a deeply male chauvinist world: the masquerade; the search for a feminine specificity, and its claim in a subjective, corporeal or embodied form.

Rewriting The Blazing Worlds

Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* was first published in 1666 and then in 1688 as an appendix to the *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*.

The novel tells the story of a young woman, involved in a shipwreck, who found herself lost on an island, in another dimension⁶. As often happens in this genre, the new world is a mirror of the 'old' one and it allows the main character and the writer herself (who often coincide) to reflect on the limits of contemporary society, on the progress that can be achieved and the best way to achieve it. This is exactly what happens to the woman who, well received in the "blazing world", soon becomes the empress. The first difference from the 'real' society lies in the almost absolute equality of the sexes. As empress, the protagonist immediately devotes herself to an in-depth study of the social, political and, above all, cultural aspects of her kingdom and soon decides to found a philosophical method of her own, with the support, however, of a mind that is equal and congenial to hers. The wise philosopher of the blazing world suggests her not to ask Gassendi, Kepler or Galilei, but rather a humbler but still lively soul like that of the Duchess of Newcastle herself. Thus, the author enters, in the second degree, the story by showing a multiplication of personalities that she had already

⁶ The story is written on the model of the Travels to other worlds, a very popular genre in that century and the next, after the *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* by Fontenelle, the novels by Wilkins (*The Discovery of A World in The Moone*, first published in London in 1638), Godwin (*The Man in the Moone* or *A Discourse of a Voyage Thither by Domingo Gonsales*, 1638), Cyrano de Bergerac (*A Discourse of The World in The Moon*) and the rediscovery of Lucian and his famous work *Icaromenippus*, *The Man in the Moon*.

staged in the *Sociable Letters*. In the Epilogue to the Reader, the author explains how to interpret the whole fancy, making explicit what we have already argued:

By this Poetical Description, you may perceive, that my ambition is not only to be Empress, but Authoress of a whole World; and that the Worlds I have made, both the *Blazing*- and the other *Philosophical* World, mentioned in the first part of this description, are framed and composed of the most pure, that is, the rational parts of matter, which are the parts of my mind. (Cavendish 1994)

Hustvedt's *Blazing World* was published in 2014. If the genre chosen by Cavendish is the utopian one, that chosen by Hustvedt is more difficult to define. We could trace it back to the genre of the biofiction, i. e., with the definition of Alexandre Gefen, a literary fiction in biographical form, in this case the life of an imaginary character. But is this character really imaginary? Or is she an alter ego of the author? In this case we should talk of autofiction.

Harry, diminutive of Harriette Burden is the protagonist of the novel, whose life is told or, rather, collected by another alter ego of the author's, something more and different than a narrator, IV Hesse, whose voice rarely intervenes in the text. In the introduction, in the first person, he (or she?) tells us of the motivations and structure of the work only after citing the most explanatory aphorism of the personality of the protagonist:

All intellectual and artistic endeavors, even jokes, ironies, and parodies, fare better in the mind of the crowd when the crowd knows that somewhere behind the great work or the great spoof it can locate a cock and a pair of balls. (Hustvedt 2014: 1)

These are the words of Burden taken from an article published under the pseudonym Richard Brickman, in the academic journal "The Open Eye", with the intention of revealing the plan behind her project (perhaps the real protagonist of the novel) entitled *Maskings*, stating that

it was meant not only to expose the antifemale bias of the art world, but to uncover the complex workings of human perception and how unconscious ideas about gender, race, and celebrity influence a viewer's understanding of a given work of art. (*ibid.*)

To stage this project Burden had hired three male artists who (between 1998 and 2003) had to pretend to be the authors of three of her works: Anton Tish for *The History of Western Art*, Phineas Q. Elridge for *The Suffocation Rooms*, Runes for *Beneath*. The experiment would have shown not only that the three works presented by males would have had a greater impact than if she had been considered the author, she, the artist who had never acquired any degree of celebrity and recognition except for being the wife of Félix Lord, a smart and very rich art dealer and discoverer of talents, but it also would have shown that the three accomplices had only been "disguises" hiding the identity of the author. Neither her identity nor that of the disguises had remained untouched, each of them confused with that of the author, and hers with theirs, and all of them together, creating a true hybrid, a 'hermaphrodite self'. And this applies not only to artistic creation, but also to the 'real' lives of the individuals involved who will come out of this experience completely distorted: Tish is unable to recognize his work, Runes and Burden herself are involved in an undecidable plagiarism case, Elridge is now freed in his homosexuality but also by the performative creativity that had distinguished him before the experiment. The story unfolds through a multi-line and choral narration, through Harry's first-person narratives, in the notebooks found during Hesse's 'academic' research, and the testimonies of those who had been close to her, Tish and Elridge, her daughter Masie and his son Ethan, her partner Bruno Kleinfeld, the faithful friend (and psychoanalyst) Rachel Briefmann, as well as some of the young penniless artists that Harry hosted in her Red Hook

workshop⁷. The narration, or rather the narrations, follow each other rather confusedly with a wealth of details that brings us back to the (non-diegetic) reality of New York art scene from the 70's to 2003. It goes by with a continuous cross-reference between the levels of reality from which occasionally even the hidden author, Siri Hustvedt herself, emerges. Harry presents her as «an obscure novelist and essayist, Siri Hustvedt, whose position Burden calls 'a moving target'» (Hustvedt 2014: 272). She introduces Margaret Cavendish as well. Her biography is constantly reported by Burden – who calls her a mother but also an alter ego and a sister –, and by all the other members of her circle – informed in various ways about the life of the duchess by Harry herself. Finally, the Duchess is 'embodied' in Burden's masterpiece, the almost completed but never presented one, which should have been Harriette Burden's debut with an uncovered face:

Harry returned to her Margaret, her Blazing World Mother creature she had begun much earlier and had nearly finished [...] This woman had worlds inside her. When you looked up and into her bald, see-through cranium, you saw little people, hordes of busy wax Lilliputians going about their business. They ran and jumped. They danced and sang. They sat at miniature desks facing computers, typewriters, or pages. When you looked closely, you could see they were making musical scores, drawings, mathematical formulas, poems, and stories [...] There were seven lascivious couples going at it upstairs in the female Gulliver's head—men and women, men and men, women and women—a regular orgy. There was a bloody sword fight and a murderer with a gun, looking down at his victim's corpse. There was a unicorn and a minotaur and a satyr and a fat angel woman with wings and lots of chubby babies in all colors. Downstairs—that is, from between the labial folds of her enormous vagina—the fertile matriarch

⁷ The complex structure, the subject and the style of the work remind of the work of Georges Perec, *Cabinet d'amateur*, which is, not by chance, mentioned by Hustvedt (Hustvedt: 2014, 286).

popped out another city of little humanoids. (Hustvedt 2014: 314-315)

The plethora of worlds that the 'real' Cavendish had set in her inner blazing world are recreated by Harry in an almost carnal body, full of her fluids, her genital apparatus, but also her imaginary parts and the instrument of work she would have used if she lived and wrote in 21st century. Hustvedt recalls also 17th century with the wonder of multiple and turning proportions and the most representative 'mask' of the period, that of Gulliver, in his relation with the little Lilliputians. In doing so, Hustvedt is creating a pure feminist mother-daughter relation with Cavendish, the way Irigaray suggested to overturn the patriarchal scheme of voices. Recreating Margaret Cavendish's body, Harry (and Hustvedt as well) gives her a new voice that speaks through the body, the mystery, the blood, and that by all this can perpetuate her generative skills, in a way and a duration different from that patriarchy had foreseen. Margaret Cavendish wasn't able to give birth to any child through her physical body, but her paper body gave birth to a female offspring lasting four centuries. Siri Hustvedt (and Harriet Burden, as well) is now called to bequeath the same heritage.

Maskings and masquerades

The practice, or better the tactic of the masquerade is the first common feature between the two authors. Hustvedt herself claims:

The duchess sometimes wore men's clothes, vests and cavalier hats. She bowed rather than curtsied. She was a beardless astonishment, a confusion of roles. She staged herself as mask or masque. Cavalier hat off to you, Duchess. May its plumage wave. Cross-dressers run rampant in Cavendish. How else can a lady gallop into the world? How else can she be heard? She must become a man or she must leave this world or she must leave her body, her mean-born body, and blaze. The duchess is a dreamer. Her

characters wield their contradictory words like banners. (Hustvedt 2014: 221)

The issue of masquerade is one of the fundamental questions of feminist visual studies, and of feminist film studies that, thanks to Mary Ann Doane, have recovered the issue from Irigaray's French feminism and from the psychoanalysis of Joan Riviere.

At its origin, the masquerade was a very popular genre of public entertainment in the English court in the first half of the seventeenth century, and later even out of the court in the English theatre till the eighteenth century⁸. It was a peculiar form of *mise en scene* playing with the subversion of roles, even gender roles, especially appreciated by women. In twentieth-century film studies, scholars such as Mary Ann Doane have detected this kind of transvestitism as a particular means of disturbance. This female tactic is somehow linked to the question of *mimicry*. This is a question discussed in two different ways by Homi Bhabha, who defined it as an "ironic compromise" (Bhabha 1984), and by Luce Irigaray, who defined it as an interim strategy for dealing with the realm of the discourse (Irigaray 1977). Both the female and the black objects share a triple kind of gaze: that of a subject, that of an object, and that of a double character being aware both of his/her looking and the to-be-looked.

Within this compromise the 'other' is recognized as a «subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite» (Bhabha 1984: 127). On the other hand, the she-subject is a hysterical subject, staging the disbelief and the oppression, while exiting the censorship of the 'master' beholder (Irigaray 1977: 168). Donning the masks attributed by the dominant visual regime doesn't mean, both for Bhabha and for Irigaray,

⁸ For the history of Masquerade and its political importance see at least: David Bevington, Peter Holbrook (ed.), *The Politics of the Stuart Court Masque*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 1998; Francis Bacon, *Of Masques and Triumphs*, in id. *Essays and New Atlantis*, New York, W.J. Black, 1942; Ben Jonson, *Neptune's Triumph For the Return of Albion*, London, 1624; Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power: Political Theater in Renaissance*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1975.

simply accepting to be an object, rather to use the resulting partiality and the virtuality as a means of resistance, with no intention of harmonizing the differences. Under the mask of desiring gazes, objects do not stop to be looked at, but what is really looked at is the image already made by the observers. The real subject with all his or her peculiarities is (more or less) safe under this image and he/she is returning the gaze, even though the beholder doesn't know it, or at least he or she is somewhere else.

Although made similar by the same hidden phallogocentric⁹ gaze, mimicry and masquerade, as means of using this apparatus to unmask its own attempt to homologate the differences, differ in something. Irigaray defines the masquerade in a more doubtful way: «an alienated or false version of femininity arising from the woman's awareness of the man's desire for her to be his other, the masquerade permits woman to experience desire not in her own right but as the man's desire situates her» (Irigaray 1977: 220).

The ways in which both Cavendish and Hustvedt use the strategy of masking are peculiar. For Cavendish the masquerade was the way to make her body speak, a body that by no means used to behave as it was supposed to do: it was a mad (or neurotic) body and, moreover, a sterile one. She had no other chance than showing up that strangeness, in the most spectacular and unobvious way, in a kind of performance that opened up her own shy body in an unacceptable way. Joyce Devlin Mosher refers to her strategy as that of the female spectacle in which the power of dressing and the display of masks, more or less fitting the male

⁹ Irigaray turns to Nietzsche and Derrida's critique of feminism and decisively connects ocularcentrism to phallogocentrism, tracing the origin of the concept of femininity as a lack in the old idealistic illusion of an eidetic reality. Since when the "perspective of truth" has forgotten the materiality and corporality of our vision the visual experience has taken root as a dialectic of the domain of those who look onto those who are looked at. But the philosophy of *différance* provides Irigaray with the means to combat "the blind spot of the old dream of symmetry", which has affected not only Freud but also Lacan's theories (Irigaray: 20)

apparatus, serve her desire of self-realization. It is the precise aesthetics that shaped her personal life and her works as well.

It is well known that Margaret Cavendish designed her physical presence as a structured demonstration of her elusive identity, described by her contemporaries under the simplified category of “bizarre and garish”¹⁰. From a less myopic point of view, we can nowadays see the design under this personal masquerade as an assumption of «the artificial in order to transcend it» (Mosher 2005: 3). In this case the artificial was the constructed fashion she produced for herself – with jewels, dressing and all kinds of accessories – and for her female characters, which had something more than the pure desire to be addressed by the gazes of everyone as a goal, for the crowd addressed their mask and not their self.

There has been a long debate about the apparent discrepancy between her innate shyness and this kind of showing off, staged for example during the visit of the Duchess to the Royal Society. Lisa T. Sarasohn frames this visit within the consideration that age had of female writing: a queer phenomenon considered as unnatural and curious as the monstrous, the hermaphroditism, in short, the in-between (Sarasohn...). An undefined object Cavendish took advantage of, not only in order to manage it as a new subject, not yet enclosed within dominant categories, but also as a mirror reflecting the same spectacularity under which the Royal scientists disguised their activity, thus manipulating the audience. While being the first woman to enter the Royal Society sessions, Cavendish, who used to wear ultra-feminine clothing, decided to show herself in male attire and performed a parade with pageboys and maids accompanying her. This is a performance that we will soon see in one of her plays, acting like Irigaray supposes the woman to act within mimicry: laying the sexual nature bare, which at the same time prevented her *self* from being absorbed. In doing so

¹⁰ This is the description of Margaret Cavendish visiting the Royal Society made by Samuel Pepys in his diaries, See *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, A new and complete transcription edited by Robert Latham and William Matthews, London, G. Bell & Sons, 1970–83, vol. 8, pp. 243–244.

Cavendish reached a triple target: to make visible what was supposed to be and to stay invisible; to *jam* the theoretical machinery, which manages both this visibility and invisibility; to suspend the pretended truth which masks the univocal meanings this machinery produces (Irigaray 1977: 78).

Far from being a passive observer of Boyle's 'spectacles', since in this way his displayed experiments were defined by the society itself, Cavendish was converting the planes of representation. Diverting the gazes from the supposed spectacle to herself, she became the object of vision, rather than the spectator, but a specific kind of object, since the body addressed was not her true body, the one she refers to as a defective one, but a masked one, the blazing body of her empress/knight to be adored and worshiped.

No longer a passive object or a controlled one, rather an object conscious of being looked at, she used and manipulated the whole system included in the general visual regime. She was not only conscious of the way in which the most acclaimed scientists were making science spectacular – i.e. an amusement rather than a profession –, but she was also very well acquainted with the whole visual society, which staged diverse sorts of bodies involving both the subjects displaying and the objects displayed.

For what concerns Hustvedt the issue is quite different. Harry, in fact, does not show herself. She always remains hidden under her masks. However, her art never mimics that of her three accomplices, on the contrary they end up being very influenced by her art, by her thought, by herself in flesh and thought. The masks used by Harry weren't fictional but real bodies of men, which in their very bodies became pieces of her art. Hustvedt makes her "Editor" explain very well in the introduction: «Each artist mask became for Burden a 'poetized personality,' a visual elaboration of a 'hermaphroditic self,' which cannot be said to belong to either her or to the mask, but to 'a mingled reality created between them'» (Hustvedt: 2014, 2).

A point of view of her own

To summarize in a few words the common thought under the works of the two authors we could say that it stays in the research on the functioning of human perception, and above all of visual perception; of how it relates to knowledge, I would say in their case to understanding; how it becomes artistic creation and is transmitted through the use of art (be it literary or figurative) in the form of words or images, in a circle of learning and endless artistic enjoyment. At the centre of this experience lies the person, the subject, because there is no knowledge of any kind that is not subjective, which does not start from a particular point of view, from the images already perceived, stored, or only imagined, even by the neural history of the person who looks, who reads, who writes, who creates.

Furthermore, both in the case of Margaret Cavendish and Siri Hustvedt, not only is knowledge subjective, it is even interior: we know through ourselves, projecting the 'matter' we are made of onto the external world and re-projecting in our interior what we perceive from the outside. Knowledge, we say today after Vittorio Gallese, is embodied.

The reference to subjectivity is crucial, especially in the case of Cavendish, almost outrageous, for an age that was trying to achieve the objectivity of scientific observation through a mechanical look. It is the age of the birth of the experimental philosophy, of the academies, first of all the Royal Society, of the observations through microscope and telescope, through those optical devices that, as Hooke and Bacon had already indicated, would have allowed the «sincere hand and the faithful eye to examine and record things as they are» (Hooke), which opened the plurality of microscopic or telescopic worlds to human sight. From that moment the human eye pretended to be able to see, and therefore to know, everything that is not human-sized. At the same time the humankind ended up being a measure of the world, centre of the universe, the whole human world was discovered to be nothing but a grain of sand in an immense universe, and that grain was only one of the possible levels of reality. This mood led to the rediscovery of ancient

journeys to the moon and to the foundation of utopian. Thus, the age of scientific certainties gave birth to science fiction. On the other hand, what better way to know an unmeasurable unknown than imagination! Cavendish was particularly sensitive to the fascination of imagination, or fantasies, considered as a real means not only of knowledge, but of perception, since the direct perception was her purpose (Cavendish 2012).

If, from her point of view, the human vision is a process shared between eye and mind, then there must be a link between imagination and reason, a link that leads to the consideration of a finer perception, particularly suited to the female imagination. This conception makes the vision, and all other kinds of knowledge, work through three different mechanisms: immediate observation, rational abstraction and imaginative speculation. The first puts the validity of optical devices as scientific instruments at risk, turning them into instruments of visual pleasure, which could make us forget the medium, as usually happens, for example, with the denial of the body as a means. The second was one of the most debated issues of the time, when the power of reason was still operating under the disembodied process of the gaze, increasingly connected to an internal and superior eye. The third, finally, represented the most dangerous concept for the era of the Royal Society, since it showed up the need of a codification – first of all a linguistic and technical codification – for all that has to do with the process of knowledge and experimentation, a codification which cannot be free from imagination.

The images of science excite, whether we like it or not, the imagination that, rather than refused, should be exploited to reach a larger part of the public. This is exactly the goal of Cavendish's works, such as *The Blazing World* which, not by chance, was the appendix of a treatise of experimental philosophy:

If you wonder, that I join a work of Fancy to my serious Philosophical Contemplations; think not that it is out of a disparagement to Philosophy; or out of an opinion, as if this noble study were but a Fiction of the Mind; for though Philosophers may

err in searching and enquiring after the Causes of Natural Effects, and many times embrace falsehoods for Truths; yet this doth not prove, that the Ground of Philosophy is merely Fiction, but the error proceeds from the different motions of Reason, which cause different Opinions in different parts [...]. And this is the reason, why I added this Piece of Fancy to my Philosophical Observations, and joined them as two Worlds at the ends of their Poles; both for my own sake, to divert my studious thoughts, which I employed in the Contemplation thereof, and to delight the Reader with variety, which is always pleasing (Cavendish: 1994, 152-153)

Cavendish considers the world made up of atoms that give shape not only to the outside world but also to mental processes, first of all that of the imagination (Cavendish 1994). Fantasy and imagination are, therefore, creative tools of knowledge through which the mind can learn from. Moreover, our knowledge is according to Cavendish, a knowledge of images, of *eidola*. Of course, our senses are the principal means by which we can come into contact with these images, but the imaginative vision brings them to light, being the mind and the forms made of the same atoms.

Sensoriality is, therefore, limited and cannot lead us to a wider knowledge. Imagination, instead, makes us discover what could exist beyond these limits. How could we, otherwise, discover unimaginable things like the microcosm and the macrocosm, other worlds within ours, the atoms or the air? Imagination is not considered as a free movement of the mind, it belongs to the same materiality of the brain, it is not fantastic and therefore it is necessary to educate it both to natural philosophy and to poetry, the first orientates it to the forms of sense, the second let her recognize form and beauty.

To this sensoriality/imagination pair, Hustvedt adds another element: memory, that is a complex process of definition of the present, of recreation (and not only reminder) of the past, of creation and imagination of the future. It is therefore made of the same substance as imagination, and of the very substance of artistic creation:

Memory and imagination partake the same mental process, they both are bound with emotion and often assume the form of narrative. Novel writing as well as any other form of artistic creativity stems from the same faculty that transmutes experience into the narratives we remember explicitly, but which are formed unconsciously (Gallese 2011: 196)

Fiction, therefore, would be the re-elaboration of unconscious memories along with emotional elements (Hustvedt calls them “tones”) and their translation into a meaningful narrative: «Writing fiction is like remembering what never happened» (Hustvedt 2011: 187).

As Hustvedt says, Margaret Cavendish was an «Anti-Cartesian, in the long run anti-atomist, anti-Hobbesian, [...] a hard-bitten monist and a materialist who didn’t, couldn’t quite leave God out of it. Her ideas overlap with Leibniz’s». On the other side, Hustvedt's ideas on fiction and imagination can easily be included into the embodied simulation theory and even more specifically seem to fall into the theory of embodied liberated simulation.

Quoting Gallese: «The body-mind systems are endowed with non-introspective pre-rational processes (embodied simulation) that generate an experience of the physical and not only mental mind: intentions, emotions and motor sensations, and also experiences lived by other people even when narrated» (Gallese 2011: 197). These systems make our mind trigger physical reactions similar to those that would be activated if we were really subjected to the stimulus that we are reading, observing or imagining. Indeed, when we read, we watch a movie, we look at a picture, the concentration of our mind and our body (which at that moment is not engaged in any other activity) release an even more powerful bodily reaction than in a non-simulated situation (liberated simulation).

From a neuroscientific perspective, therefore the clear separation between real and fictional, between real worlds and fictional worlds appears much less defined and much less clear than we have imagined for centuries. Thus «when the artist, through his imaginative creativity, gives life to a fictional world, it shares with the real one not only many

of its aspects, but also many of its supporting neuronal processes» (*ibid.*: 199). We would say, as Cavendish said, that the imaginary worlds are made of the same substance as the mind, and they do not reside anywhere but within us.

According to Vittorio Gallese, Siri Hustvedt demonstrates that «neuroscience and psychoanalysis can converge when they deal with the world of fiction, as both see the body as the common playground for the imagination» (Gallese 2011: 200).

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The Author

Valeria Cammarata

Valeria Cammarata is Assistant Professor in Comparative Literature at the University of Palermo. Her main search field is the relation between literature and visual culture. In particular she is interested in the forms of phototext and *ékphrasis*, and in the female gaze and its literary representation from early modern period to today. Among her publications: WJT Mitchell, *Pictorial turn. Saggi di cultura visuale*, M. Cometa, V. Cammarata eds, 2017, V. Cammarata, M. Cometa, R. Coglitore, *Archeologies of Visual Culture*, 2016; *Breve storia femminile dello sguardo*, 2014, *Donne al microscopio*, 2013.

Email: valeria.cammarata@unipa.it

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